

From 1934 until 1984 that bastion of journalist integrity, the national treasure that is the BBC, had MI5 vet all editorially sensitive job candidates for possible subversive opinions and connections (for example, in the 1930s, the Relief Committee for Victims of German Fascism). The BBC demanded that the department do this with such enthusiasm that the spooks more than once complained of the workload.

Unreliables finished up (as Mark Hollingsworth and Richard Norton-Taylor reported in 1988) with “a buff folder with a round red sticker, stamped with the legend SECRET and a symbol which looked like a Christmas tree”. I have never dared ask to see mine – for I cannot face the shame of discovering that I did not merit the Christmas tree. Were it not there, such clear evidence of champagne socialist pretensions would not be bearable. Tom Mills, in *The BBC: Myth of a Public Service*, puts my fear into properly evidenced context.

Hovering over analyses of the corporation and its doings has always been a cloud no bigger than a person's hand. The cloud threatens the received notion (secured in the public mind by the BBC's behaviour in the face of Mr Hitler) of its unblemished character as a cultural force and, especially, as an exemplary neutral, balanced and reliable news source. However, hidden within the cloud where Mills lives is an alternative account. It is one less of uncorruptible, editorially valiant and fearlessly independent “pinkoes and traitors” kicking the establishment at every turn, than of true-blues and toadies eager to do its work.

Actually, as Mills painstakingly explains, there should be no wonder at this because there is no distinction between the BBC and the establishment. It is the establishment. In 2014, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission found 26 per cent of senior BBC executives to have been privately educated and 33 per cent were Oxbridge graduates. (Of course, we now live in egalitarian times and the percentage doubles when Russell Group universities are counted.) We have long been beglamoured – in that particularly successful English fashion – and see none of this.

The little cloud's alternative account reveals the extent to which the BBC's performance is hobbled by its real position in national life. It gives the lie to the

“myth” of its independence. Thus, the DNA of BBC journalism, the prime locus of the myth, is simply not imbued with a passion to comfort the afflicted or speak truth to power. Its consequent deficiencies as a news provider start on day one (actually some months before the first licensed broadcast of the Corporation on 1 January, 1927) with Reith's perfidy in covering the 1926 general strike, simply denying the workers any voice. And failings are a constant descant, much of which Mills retails, to the independence myth through to the present. It is a matter of persistent improper influences, egregious reporting and biased agenda setting.

Mills is too careful not to acknowledge the complexities and contradiction involved, though. It has been, most of the time, the genius of our political culture to put the softest iron fist into the thickest of velvet gloves. The BBC is the perfect example. It is smart (or confused) enough to cover its traces. So, by the 1960s, MI5 was complaining that the corporation had adopted a “deliberate policy to offer jobs to some people with ultra-left records whom they considered creative and desirable” – those who gave us, say, *Cathy Come Home*. Anathema to *The Telegraph* and the *Mail*: wonderful cover for its underlying pusillanimity.

For Mills, the BBC's “central problem throughout its history has been the extent to which powerful interests have been able to influence its institutional culture and its output”. But it goes deeper than that. The BBC is designed constitutionally to be so influenced and his book indicates nothing less.

There is barely a word about what the BBC produces outside of news, current affairs and the odd controversial documentary. Not a word about drama, the arts, children etc: ie Culture with a capital “C”. The point is that complaints about sex, violence and dumbing down are simply not of the same constitutional moment as rows about the news. The state does not totter because of D'Arcy's wet shirt. The inescapable problem is that liberal democracies have no business being in the news business. Pretending to be an independent source of news (a fiction Mills ably addresses) makes it worse. Until this is faced, the BBC's future is dark.

That aside, the story is unfamiliar enough to warrant Mills's detailed account and he is correct to suggest its implications are ignored. This book makes that harder to do. Thanks.